

EVA STALIN IAS ACADEMY

12/24, Muthuranga Mudali St, next to Deepam Hospital,
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The corridor of Kolkata's bypass urbanism

Urbanisation in India is shaped by three important factors. First, colonialism played a catalytic role in creating urban spaces, which continued even after Independence until the 1960s. Second and third, the Green Revolution and neoliberalisation in the 1970s and 1990s have consolidated these urban spaces into concrete enclaves. Metropolitan cities such as Chennai, Mumbai, and Kolkata, which are products of colonial urbanism, metamorphosed radically in later years.

These cities have expanded quite substantially and witnessed rapid urbanisation to accommodate more people and their demands. The wealth generated due to the Green Revolution and neoliberal policies has further accelerated urban expansion, albeit in an unequal manner. Newer forms of consumer culture have seeped effortlessly into these urban spaces, thus bringing revolutionary changes in the housing, health, and education sectors.

A city within a city

With reference to Calcutta, in the initial years of Independence, the city was called entangled, congested, and decaying by the then State government. A political decision was initiated to build Salt Lake City, a city within Calcutta city, eventually envisioned as a supposedly clean Tabularasa city. The entanglements in the existing city, notably pertain to its poor infrastructure facilities, such as water, sanitation, and slums, with poverty, traffic, and, with oblivious governance, and minimal accountability for public city spaces.

In the process of expanding the city, the State further developed by building the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass (EM Bypass) in the 1980s, connecting Kolkata's north-east part with its southern part. The construction of the MAA flyover and EM Bypass roads certainly eased or 'bypassed' the congestion, poverty, and, of course, the free flow of traffic. The infrastructural developments around the road yielded enormous benefits by significantly increasing the flow of goods, people, and ideas too. But they also resulted in a host of other problems. The economist, the late Kalyan Sanyal, along with Rajesh Bhattacharya from the Indian Institute of Management Calcutta, made the brilliant observation that approaching urbanisation



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through the 'bypass route' was to replace the old with a new class of producers and consumers. This replacement also brought up a relevant question: 'whose city is it?'

'Urban outcasts'

Seven-star hotels, luxury residential apartments, clubs, international schools, hospitals, and malls are all situated on this 40-kilometre stretch of bypass. It is evident that the echo system built around (parallel to) the bypass, either with or without the intervention of the state, was meant solely for the consumption of the rich. The clear outcome (of this replacement) is the creation of a socio-spatial hierarchical system that creates neighbourhoods that are stigmatised. Some of the high-rise building complexes have blocks that are demarcated based on income groups: high income group (HIG), middle income group (MIG), and lower income group (LIG). These demarcations point to an urban crisis.

The problems are much worse for the social groups that live outside these Ivory towers. They embraced mutely to these uninvited social problems just by living adjacent to these swanky hotels and apartments, only to become urban outcasts – a phrase used by Bourdieuan sociologist Loic Wacquant (2008). The socio-spatial techniques of inquiry make it evident that the inhabitants living in these ghettos may be insiders of the city but are still outsiders – a mix of dispossessed and dishonoured people. The small *padas* have turned into territories of deprivation, subjugation, and inequality, disrupting respectful social life. It is vital to understand the negative effects of the growth of urbanisation to unpack the breadth and depth of these disruptions. The bourgeois capitalist economy and the public policies of the communist regime created a 'servicing class' and labour market pockets to cater to the needs of elites within arm's reach.

The moral right they possess, historically and sociologically, to choose a neighbour was snatched by the remarkable development called real estate that created swanky condominiums that sit right next to shanty houses, more so in the last three decades. The combination of the sociological matrix of caste, class, and religion has come together to produce urban marginality, not to forget the importance of different avatars

of the state. The 'wretched' of the city were deeply exploited in neoliberal globalisation policies, along with colonial and nationalist policies that eventually broke their socio-spatial premises. Kolkata became a place where anti-colonial movements sprang, and which later became a communist bastion, thus making it a textbook case to examine the contemporary dynamics of urbanisation. Importantly, the newer dimensions, such as the construction of a single new town, a city within the city, a real estate project, or an ensemble of various independent but related projects, all of them either adjacent to or parallel to the road or bypass, not in a systematic manner but in a sporadically or sparsely manner, can be called 'bypass urbanism', manifestly a slow but strongly emerging concept in urban studies.

Roads and change

Roads are traditionally meant to be a means for the circulation of goods, ideas, and human beings. For historian David Arnold, their functions are much more than that. He interpreted them as "a manifestation of linear modes of power and... as a salient site of social observation, engagement, and friction". They have different nomenclatures, reflect heterogeneity. For instance, a bypass is a road that avoids or 'bypasses' built-up areas to let traffic flow through without any interference or congestion.

They are called truck routes in the United States which are intended to create hassle-free routes for the transportation of goods. In a number of European countries, the Americas, and a few Asian countries, these bypasses are quite popular. In these places, they are referred to as circular roads or orbital roads. Historically speaking, the roads in India, especially since Independence, have brought a significant 'dynamism and assumed a new sociability' that reiterates the past (Arnold, 2013).

Urban infrastructural developments, instead of creating assimilation or integration between different sections, have invariably created estrangements based on their social and class identities. The bypass is not just a road that connects one point to another by avoiding bottlenecks. It also, unintendedly, does socio-economic bypassing in everyday life.

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The climate crisis is not gender neutral

The climate crisis is already here and does not impact everyone equally. Women and girls experience disproportionately high health risks, especially in situations of poverty, and due to existing roles, responsibilities and cultural norms. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), women and children are 14 times more likely than men to die in a disaster. The Supreme Court of India has just ruled that people have a right to be free from the adverse effects of climate change, and the right to a clean environment is already recognised as a fundamental right within the ambit of the right to life.

Agriculture is the most important livelihood source for women in India, particularly in rural India. Climate-driven crop yield reductions increase food insecurity, adversely impacting poor households that already suffer higher nutritional deficiencies. Within small and marginal landholding households, while men face social stigma due to unpaid loans (leading to migration, emotional distress, and sometimes even suicide), women experience higher domestic work burdens, worse health, and greater intimate partner violence. In fact, when compared to districts without droughts in the past 10 years, National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 4 and 5 data showed that women living in drought-prone districts were more underweight, experienced more intimate partner violence and had a higher prevalence of girl marriages. For women, the increasing food and nutritional insecurity, work burdens and income uncertainties lead not only to poor physical health, but also impact their mental health and emotional well-being.

Extreme events and gender-based violence

The world is witnessing an increasing frequency of extreme weather events and climate-induced natural hazards. A report from the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW) in 2021 found that 75% of Indian districts are vulnerable to hydrometeorological disasters (floods, droughts and cyclones). NFHS 5 data showed that over half of women and children living in these districts were at risk. Studies are increasingly showing a direct correlation between these natural disasters and gender-based violence against women. Also, extreme weather events and subsequent changes in water cycle patterns severely impact access to safe drinking water, which increases the drudgery and reduces time for productive work and health care of women and girls.

The past decade has been the hottest ever



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While climate action requires 100% involvement of the population, at the same time, empowering women would mean better climate solutions

recorded in human history and countries such as India are likely to face unprecedented heatwaves. Prolonged heat is particularly dangerous for pregnant women (increasing the risk of preterm birth and eclampsia), young children, and the elderly. Similarly, exposure to pollutants in the air (household and outdoor) affects women's health, causing respiratory and cardiovascular disease, and also the unborn child, impairing its physical and cognitive growth. One of the most worrying aspects of air pollution is its impact on the growing brain. Emerging data from cohort studies in India show that for every 10 micrograms per cubic meter increase in PM_{2.5}, the risk of lung cancer increases by 9%, the risk of cardiovascular deaths on the same day by 3%, and stroke by 8%. For dementia, the risk increased by 4% for 2 micrograms increase in annual PM_{2.5}.

Of course, not all women are equally at risk, even within the same geographic or agro-ecological zone. Thus, though climate change has a distinct gender dimension, there is a need for more evidence on the intersectionalities that make certain sub-groups more vulnerable and therefore in need of more protection.

Why does climate action need women?

Climate action requires 100% of the population if we want to achieve the Paris Agreement goal of limiting global temperature rise to 1.5° C. At the same time, empowering women means better climate solutions; when provided with the same access to resources as men, women increased their agricultural yields by 20% to 30%. Tribal and rural women, in particular, have been at the forefront of environmental conservation. Giving women and women collectives (Self-help Groups and Farmer Producer Organisations) the knowledge, tools and access to resources would encourage local solutions to emerge. Adaptation measures will necessarily be different in rural and urban areas as exposure to heat, air pollution and access to water and food will vary by context.

On heatwaves and water shortage

While gaps in data (sex disaggregated data for multiple social outcomes) and knowledge need to be filled by more research, there are areas where immediate action is needed. First, we should reduce the impact of prolonged heat on priority groups (outdoor workers, pregnant women, infants and young children and the elderly). Data from many Indian cities show that there are excess deaths during the heat wave days, though they may not be recognised as such. Loss of productivity will impact small and large businesses and our economy. Urban local bodies,

municipal corporations and district authorities in all vulnerable districts need to have a plan and provide training and resources to key implementers. Heat wave warnings (based on local temperature plus humidity), change of timings for outdoor work and schools, cooling rooms in health facilities, public drinking water facilities, and immediate treatment of those with heat stroke will minimize deaths. In addition, urban planning to improve tree cover, minimising concrete, increasing green-blue spaces and designing housing that is better able to withstand heat are longer-term actions. The Mahila Housing Trust in Udaipur showed that painting the roofs of low-income houses with reflective white paint reduced indoor temperatures by 3° C to 4° C and improved quality of life.

Water shortage is probably the biggest threat to our very existence and needs concerted societal action. Traditionally, India had one of the most advanced systems for rainwater harvesting and storage with a system of ponds and canals. Work done by the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation in a few districts of Tamil Nadu showed that using geographic information systems, the panchayat could map key water sources, identify vulnerabilities and climate hazards and develop a local plan to improve water access by directing government schemes and resources.

Working at the village level

Convergence of sectors and services and prioritisation of actions can happen most effectively at the village or panchayat levels. Devolution of powers and finances and investing in building the capacity of panchayat and SHG members can be India's way of demonstrating how to build resilience in a community-led and participatory way.

Finally, a gender lens needs to be applied to all State-action plans on climate change. The National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) and State Action Plan on Climate Change (SAPCC) highlight the impacts on women, yet often default to portraying them as victims, missing deeper gender dynamics. A review of 28 SAPCCs showed a lack of transformative approaches, with only a few recognising women as agents of change. Recommendations for the ongoing revision of SAPCCs lay stress on the need to move beyond stereotypes, recognise the vulnerabilities of all genders, and implement gender-transformative strategies, ensuring a comprehensive and equitable approach to climate adaptation. Instead of being labelled as victims, women can lead the way in climate action.